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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000889

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DAS SPIRNAK'S MEETING WITH ITALIAN VICE DIRECTOR  
GENERAL FOR MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS, LUIGI MARRAS

REF: ROME 852

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires EDIBBLE, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (U) On the margins of a July 24 discussion on the Broader Middle East Initiative, NEA Acting DAS Madelyn Spirnak spoke with Italian MFA Vice Director General Luigi Marras about the situation in Iran, Lebanon and Syria.

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Iran  
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¶2. (C) Spirnak complimented Marras for Italy's handling of the situation regarding Iranian participation at the G8 Ministerial in Trieste. (Note: having invited the Iranian Foreign Minister to participate in the G8 Outreach Meeting on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and having received no reply, the Italians closed the window on responses in the aftermath of Iranian election chaos, only to have the Iranians express interest in attending. Through the Iranian Ambassador in Rome, the Italians then privately indicated that the time was not right for such participation, thus quietly avoiding a diplomatic incident.) She asked Marras, who served in Tehran earlier in his career, for his analysis of the situation there.

¶3. (C) Marras began by noting that no one knows what will happen. "We do know basic things," he said, such as that Khomeini and Ahmadinejad are weakened and that their political destinies might not be linked. He said that it was his understanding that the various military forces in Iran are still under the control of the government (both Khomeini and Ahmadinejad, he specified) and that rural areas are in favor of Ahmadinejad, constituting 40% of the population.

¶4. (C) On the urban demonstrations, Marras believed that they represented a power struggle among the mullahs. He noted, however, that we haven't seen the "bazaar" taking sides yet, and that this is a segment of the population that acts as a barometer of things to come. The Iranians fear foreign intervention, he noted. He commented that while there is no common EU view, "Italy is isolated" (presumably in the extent of its desire to avoid any confrontation). The French want a public stance condemning the detention of researcher Clothilde Reiss, while the GOI (as had also been reiterated by the Iran desk, reftel) did not think the time was right for provocation, and feels any approach to the Iranians should be done in private. If the EU takes on the issue publicly, Marras thought that "Ms. Reiss will be in jail for a long time." Marras said there has not yet been an EU-wide decision whether and at what level to attend the inauguration of the new Iranian government. Italy is cautious, he said, and "does not want to irritate Iran if there is no need to do so," noting that the French admit that for them, it's a domestic political issue, and that they need to "show some muscle."

¶5. (C) Regarding Iran's attitude toward the US, he said the

Iranians did not know how to deal with President Obama, and are therefore focusing more on blaming the UK than the US for its troubles. Making the point that all factions are pro nuclear, Marras noted that even Rafsanjani's speech accused the west of wanting to steal Iran's nuclear technology. For Iranians, he thought it was difficult to accept that India and Pakistan should be nuclear, and not their country.

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Lebanon  
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¶6. (C) Acting DAS Spirnak thanked Italy for its leadership of UNIFIL, noting that the mandate would be renewed at the end of August, and that Israel wants to see the UNIFIL mandate strengthened. Marras responded that to do so might be "difficult and dangerous," suggesting that Italy had been able to do a good job because of the way in which the mandate was written. Questioned for information on the July 14 Hezbollah arms depot explosion, Marras said he had not heard anything recently.

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Syria  
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¶7. (C) Marras said the GOI believes Syria can play a positive role with respect to Iraq as well as the peace process. He applauded US discussions with Syria and asked for an update. Spirnak noted that the US was progressing in its talks, with concerns focusing on human rights and cracking down on foreign fighter networks. Marras noted that

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there would be no peace "tomorrow or next year," but that if the situation in Syria were under control, it would help take pressure off Israel.

¶8. (C) Near East desk Daniele Bosio reviewed the status of the EU Association Agreement the European Commission is negotiating with Syria, which contains significant trade components. According to Bosio, the Agreement is almost complete. The texts have been initialed and now need to be translated into all EU official languages before a formal signature, which will probably take place in September. The Agreement will then need to be ratified by all national Parliaments.  
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